

Schools balance cellphone bans, safety

As policies take devices out of students’ hands, fears of classroom attacks remain

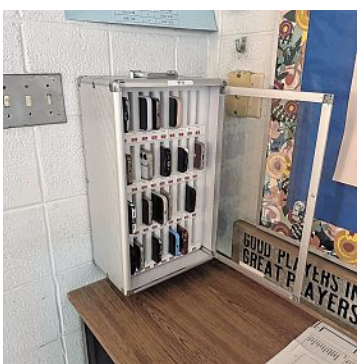
By Natasha Sokoloff
STAFF WRITER

From locking phones in pouches to the “off and away” approach, more Connecticut school districts have implemented policies to get cellphones out of the classroom, but have been forced to balance their restrictions with widespread concerns about school safety.

the number of shootings that occur in schools, that parents are going to continually be concerned about that... It’s a scary time in the world in schools. It just is,” said Manchester Public Schools Superintendent Matthew Geary. “Unfortunately, we are balancing that with the vast majority of the time, where we’re trying to keep kids engaged and on task in schools.”

guidance around cellphone restrictions last year, Connecticut education officials have had some conversations about what lines of communication in crisis situations look like, said John Frassinelli, director of school health, nutrition and family services at the state Department of Education, at the Sept. 3 meeting. “But we haven’t had calls questioning the implementation of those cell phone policies. Quite the opposite, actually,” he said.

magnetically locking Yondr pouches, officials have described the phone-free approach as a “model” for other districts, noting the policy’s positive results such as better grades and attendance. And this school year, even more schools are implementing their own restrictions.



Courtesy of Stratford Public Schools
Stratford high school students store cellphones in secure boxes in each classroom.

“I fully understand, because of

Since the state published its



Photos by Arnold Gold/Hearst Connecticut Media
From left, Dakota Rudloff-Eastman, with her daughter, Ila, 7 weeks, and husband Matthew Went at Old Bishop Farm in Cheshire on Wednesday. They recently signed a lease to operate the farm, also shown below.

State seeks to dismiss vaccine exemption lawsuit

By Paul Hughes
STAFF WRITER

A state lawsuit challenging the 2021 repeal of a religious exemption for required school vaccinations in Connecticut continues to slowly play out as the heated national debate on vaccine policy is picking up steam again.

The potentially momentous case was scheduled to proceed in state Superior Court in Stamford on Sept. 30, but will not go forward on that date now because of renewed state legal efforts to get the suit tossed out before a trial.

Parents from Orange, Greenwich and Stafford Springs are suing to reinstate the religious exemption because they allege its 2021 repeal violated state and federal protections on the free exercise of religion, including the state’s Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Vaccines continues on A6

STAMFORD

Amid pushback, board weighs housing changes for city plan

By Tyler Fedor
STAFF WRITER

STAMFORD — Stamford was slated to begin construction of more than a thousand apartments in 2025, and a slew of other housing projects have already been proposed to or approved this year by the city.

The city, however, has to create a framework to guide that growth. To do that, city officials review and update the city’s comprehensive plan — a “framework for achieving the city’s 2035 goals as set by its residents and government,” according to the city’s website — every 10 years.

The city is going through that process this year, but the update has drawn the ire

Plan continues on A4

Saving historic farm ‘kind of a dream’ for CT couple

Married partners add Cheshire fields to their growing list

By Luther Turmelle
STAFF WRITER

Dakota Rudloff-Eastman and her husband Matthew Went are doing their bit to save farming in Connecticut, one property at a time.

The latest example of the couple’s commitment to local farming is the lease they have signed with John Torello to operate Old Bishop Farm on South Meriden Road in Cheshire. They already own the 34-acre organic River Ridge Farm in Portland, lease the 57-acre Ives Farm in Cheshire and operate a small farm store in Middletown that opened in 2022.

Old Bishop Farm offers Rudloff-Eastman and Went



both a 15-acre working farm and retail store all rolled into one.

“It’s such a great spot,” Rudloff-Eastman said. “It’s kind of a dream to find the infrastructure that fits just what we’ve been looking for.”

The farm and business have been closed since last fall as Torello sought to find a buyer for the property. Torello and his wife Carolyn bought the farm in 2015 and after spending more than two years renovating the property and the

store, opened for business in 2018.

The history of the farm can be traced back to Revolutionary War times, according to Torello, but by the time he and his wife had bought the property, it had fallen into disrepair.

Rudloff-Eastman first contacted Torello about leasing Old Bishop Farm a few weeks ago. Things have moved pretty fast since then and the couple now hope to reopen Old Bishop Farm on Sept. 20 if they can get health department approval by then.

Rudloff-Eastman and Went, a Meriden native, lived in Maine before moving to Connecticut in 2019 and opening River Ridge Farm a year later.

Farm continues on A6

CT program for formerly incarcerated women adding two cities

By Lisa Backus
STAFF WRITER

BRIDGEPORT — On a cloudy day in August, Allison Strait recalled how daunting it was to be released from prison a few months before with no services, access to clothing, food or a connection to help with finding a job.

But since attending the Restore, Inspire, Support and Empower program for women who are formerly

incarcerated at Family Reentry in Bridgeport, the 45-year-old Strait has gotten help applying for food stamps and a cellphone, she said.

“Their groups are so emotionally supportive,” she said in a conference room at the agency’s Washington Avenue location. “The one on ones give me a place where I can vent.”

The nonprofit started the RISE program five

years ago at the height of the pandemic from a donation from a single benefactor. Family Reentry also provides a variety of other services including domestic violence programs, mentoring programs and behavioral health services.

But it is the RISE program for women who are attempting to put their lives back together after incarceration that has made such an impact that the agency received a \$1

million grant from the state over two years to expand into New Haven and Hartford. The additional RISE programs will open in mid-October.

Only 2% of the women who have gone through the program have returned to prison, said Ginger Wilk, senior director of reentry services. More than 75% of RISE clients have obtained jobs, the agency said.



Courtesy of Ginger Wilk
Bridgeport Mayor Joe Ganim, back row center, poses with the 2025 graduating class of RISE. The program is expanding to Hartford and New Haven.